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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force for the period from 25 November 2017 to 23 February 2018

I. Introduction

1. The present report gives an account of the activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) during the period from 25 November 2017 to 23 February 2018, pursuant to the mandate contained in Security Council resolution 350 (1974) and extended in subsequent resolutions, most recently resolution 2394 (2017).

II. Situation in the area of operation and activities of the Force

2. During the reporting period, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was maintained, albeit in a volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and notwithstanding a number of violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces (Disengagement of Forces Agreement) of 1974, which are described below. The Syrian armed forces and non-State armed opposition groups engaged in exchanges of heavy weapons fire in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. Different armed groups, including the listed terrorist groups Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly the Nusrah Front)[1] and Khalid ibn al-Walid Army,[2] which pledged allegiance to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), continued to exchange fire in the UNDOF area of operation. As underscored again by the Security Council in its resolution 2394 (2017), there should be no military activity of any kind in the area of separation.

3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and see that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, UNDOF reports all breaches of the ceasefire line that it observes. All incidents of firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line, as well as the crossing by individuals of the ceasefire line are violations of the Disengagement of Forces

[1] In July 2016, the Nusrah Front announced that it had changed its name to Jabhat Fath al Sham and declared that it had cut ties with Al-Qaida.

[2] The merger between Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and Harakat al Muthana was initially announced on 12 April 2016. On 24 May 2016, open sources reported that both groups were operating under the umbrella name of "Khalid ibn al-Walid Army". On 20 July 2017, the group was listed by the Security Council, pursuant to annex III of resolution 2368 (2017), as being associated with ISIL or Al-Qaida.

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Agreement. In its regular interaction with both sides, the leadership of UNDOF continued to call upon both parties to exercise restraint and prevent any miscalculations that might lead to an escalation of the situation. That was particularly the case when it responded to incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire.

4. An incident of particular concern occurred on 10 February involving an escalation of tension between the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. On that day, the Israel Defense Forces informed UNDOF that it had "intercepted an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle launched from Syria" and that it had taken defensive action against the unmanned aerial vehicle and Syrian targets. The Israel Defense Forces also reported that one of its F-16 fighter jets had been shot down, crash-landing on Israeli territory, injuring two Israeli pilots. The senior Syrian Arab delegate informed UNDOF on 10 February of air strikes by Israeli aircraft in Homs and east of Damascus. On the same day, UNDOF observed that three rockets had been launched from the vicinity of Harrah on the Bravo side, about 10 km from United Nations observation post 54, had flown over observation posts 53 and 54 and had subsequently crossed the ceasefire line. UNDOF was not in a position to determine the exact point of impact.

5. There were several other incidents in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. On 2 December 2017, United Nations personnel at observation post 51 saw four missiles from the Alpha side (Israeli-occupied Golan) flying over the area of separation into the area of limitation on the Bravo side. Shortly thereafter, two heavy explosion impacts were observed on the ridgeline between Tall al Sha'r and Tall al-Bazzaq, in the area of limitation on the Bravo side. The Israel Defense Forces stated to UNDOF that it had no knowledge of the incident. On 1 February, United Nations personnel observed two fighter jets from the Alpha side flying over the ceasefire line and observation post 54, and across the area of separation into the area of limitation. A short time later, heavy explosions were heard approximately 14 km south-east of observation post 54, in the general vicinity of Tasil and Tall al-Jamusin the area of limitation on the Bravo side. Later the same day, United Nations personnel at observation post 54 observed two rockets fired from the Alpha side over the observation post and across the area of separation. UNDOF did not see the exact point of impact of the rocket rounds.

6. On 4 January 2018, United Nations personnel at observation post 51 observed three Israel Defense Forces soldiers, who were patrolling the ceasefire line, disembark from their vehicle and fire two flares into the area of separation. On 6 January 2018, United Nations personnel at observation post 53 saw an Israel Defense Forces soldier fire three single shots from his personal weapon into the area of separation.

7. UNDOF continued to observe, on a daily basis, the crossing of the ceasefire line by unidentified persons from the Bravo side to the Alpha side. In the vicinity of observation post 54, individuals from the Bravo side were observed regularly entering an Israel Defense Forces position on foot on the Alpha side and subsequently leaving, crossing the ceasefire line and moving towards Al Mullaqah on the Bravo side. The Israel Defense Forces had previously informed UNDOF that a hospital located adjacent to its position was providing humanitarian assistance to local civilians.

8. On Mount Hermon, instances of interaction between Israel Defense Forces personnel and individuals from the Bravo side were observed by UNDOF during the first half of the reporting period. UNDOF cannot confirm or verify the nature of the interactions, which typically involved unidentified individuals from the Bravo side, with unloaded mules, approaching the Israeli technical fence as well as Israel Defense Forces positions and subsequently returning to the Bravo side with loaded mules carrying unidentified supplies. On 30 November 2017, UNDOF observed persons on stretchers being handed over to Israel Defense Forces personnel.

9. The level of transborder movements through Mount Hermon of unidentified individuals crossing between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic decreased during the reporting period.

10. In the context of the ongoing Syrian conflict, the northern part of the areas of separation and limitation saw fighting of medium- to high-level intensity, in particular during November and December 2017, between the Syrian armed forces supported by pro-Government forces and armed groups in the Bayt Jinn pocket area, which consists of the towns of Bayt Jinn, Mazra'at Bayt Jinn and Mughur al-Mir, following an attack by the former in September 2017. A high level of military activity was observed and heard by UNDOF in the general vicinity of Bayt Jinn. On 29 November 2017, UNDOF personnel heard high explosives in the area. On 1 December 2017, UNDOF personnel observed an Mi-24 helicopter with its engines on fire, flying at a high altitude, approximately 10 km south-east of their position. Subsequently, the helicopter lost altitude and exploded in mid-air. During December, UNDOF observed high explosives emanating from Bayt Jinn and the surrounding area, with approximately 1,377 heavy explosions heard on 25 December, in Camp Faouar, which is within 8 km of Bayt Jinn.

11. Throughout the reporting period, UNDOF also observed heavy and small arms fire around Hadar and the surrounding hilltops. On 26 December 2017, Syrian armed forces took control of the village of Mughur al-Mir, with open sources reporting that the end of hostilities was negotiated between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the armed groups in the remaining villages surrounding Bayt Jinn. The military activity subsided considerably following the regaining of the area by pro-Government forces. The fighting has since remained at a low level.

12. Fighting between armed groups and Syrian armed forces in the central parts of the areas of separation and limitation continued at medium- to low-level intensity. Throughout the reporting period, an M-46 artillery gun was observed at a firing position in the vicinity of Qunaytirah, occasionally firing north and east. On 11 December 2017, United Nations personnel at observation post 51 observed the M-46 artillery gun firing eight rounds. The precise point of impact of the artillery rounds could not be determined. Later, incoming fire was observed, presumably in response to the firing of the M-46 artillery gun. Two heavy explosions were heard impacting within 1 km north of Camp Ziouani. UNDOF was not in a position to determine the origin of the retaliatory fire. On 31 December 2017, two heavy explosions were observed in the vicinity of Qunaytirah. On 30 January 2018, UNDOF heard rounds being fired from the M-46 artillery gun in the vicinity of Qunaytirah and observed explosions occurring in the vicinity of Hamidiyah al-Jadidah. On 22 January 2018, United Nations personnel at observation post 51 observed three individuals inspecting what appeared to be a towed self-propelled artillery gun near the vacated United Nations outpost 60A, located near the southern access to the berm constructed by armed groups in 2016 inside the area of separation. The berm facilitates movement of armed groups between Hamidiyah al-Jadidah and Jubbata al-Khashab in the area of separation.

13. In the southern part of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side, which remain for the most part under the control of non-State armed groups, including those listed by the Security Council as terrorist groups, fighting continued between armed groups, especially the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, on one side, and the Free Syrian Army and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, on the other. According to open sources, intermittent fighting continued around the area of Tasil in the area of limitation. United Nations personnel at position 80 and observation post 54 occasionally heard heavy explosions and bursts of heavy machine gun fire from the general direction of Tasil.

14. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed the continuous presence of unidentified individuals at United Nations observation post 71, ranging from two to six individuals at the post. At times, UNDOF observed construction work taking place in the vicinity of post 71 and a number of other nearby locations on what appeared to be defensive positions. On 8 December 2018, at least 10 unidentified persons were observed carrying out construction work5 km north-east of observation post 73. On 12 December 2017, 15 individuals, equipped with a bulldozer, were carrying out construction work in the vicinity of observation post 71. On 15 December 2017, UNDOF observed two bulldozers being utilized to fortify protective locations east of temporarily vacated UNDOF position 10.

15. Throughout the reporting period, the Syrian armed forces maintained positions in the area of separation, in particular in the vicinity of Ba'th and Khan Arnabah, as well as along the main road connecting Qunaytirah to Damascus.

16. The military violations on the Alpha side included approximately 90 reports of the presence of 155-mm artillery, as well as Iron Dome systems and missile carriers within the 25 km zone of the area of limitation, which are considered unauthorized military equipment in the area of limitation pursuant to the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

17. UNDOF protested all violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement that it observed to both parties, including the crossing of the ceasefire line by civilians from the Bravo side, the presence of unauthorized equipment and armed individuals in the area of separation, as well as firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line.

18. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed several locations where approximately 550 tents and other structures appeared to have been set up for internally displaced persons in the area of separation and in its vicinity. The number of people in the camps could not be ascertained and appeared to fluctuate. Owing to the closure of the established crossing point at Qunaytirah between the Alpha and Bravo sides since late August 2014, UNDOF remains unable to facilitate, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, humanitarian crossings, including for students, between the two sides.

19. Since its temporary relocation from a number of positions in September 2014, and pending its full return to the area of separation, UNDOF has continued to maintain visibility, albeit limited, of the area of separation and the ceasefire line from its positions on Mount Hermon, Camp Faouar, position 80, in the southern part of the area of separation, and position 22 on the Alpha side. UNDOF operations continued to be supported by United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) military observers in Observer Group Golan, who are under the operational control of UNDOF and have maintained five fixed and four temporary observation posts along the ceasefire line, as well as four temporary observation posts on Mount Hermon. The focus of the activities of Observer Group Golan is on continuous static observation and situational awareness. The occupation by Observer Group Golan of observation posts on Mount Hermon was suspended on 3 December 2017 with the onset of winter and will resume in the spring.

20. Through Observer Group Golan, UNDOF continued to carry out fortnightly inspections of equipment and force levels in the area of limitation on the Alpha side. Liaison officers from the Alpha side accompanied the inspection teams. Inspections in the area of limitation on the Bravo side remained suspended because of the security situation.

21. Engagement between UNDOF and the Israel Defense Forces continued to endeavour to address restrictions of movement and access to United Nations positions

in the area of separation and to reduce delays and challenges experienced by United Nations personnel in crossing through the technical fence to observation posts and positions. The Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNDOF continued to remind the parties of their obligation to scrupulously abide by the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, to ensure the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the ground and to extend all cooperation to UNDOF in the fulfilment of the tasks under its mandate.

22. UNDOF, in consultation with both parties, continued to review the situation in the area of separation in order to assess whether the conditions on the ground permitted the return to vacated positions in the area of separation. In that regard, UNDOF conducted assessment visits and continuously monitored the prevailing security situation in the area of separation, mainly in the vicinity of United Nations observation posts 52, 56, 71 and 72, and positions 10, 16 and 32.

23. During the reporting period, UNDOF made progress towards the limited return to Bravo side operations, in line with the phased UNDOF plan. Following the completion of phase 1 of the plan re-establishing on 14 November 2016 the presence of UNDOF at Camp Faouar, UNDOF continued to develop the infrastructure and steadily improve the living conditions at the camp. The security and defence of the Camp have been continuously practised, and all deployed elements have been integrated into a cohesive and effective component, with clear command and control mechanisms.

24. Following the deployment of the UNDOF mechanized infantry company from Nepal to Camp Faouar at the end of September 2017, UNDOF activated phase 2 of the plan to return to vacated positions in the area of separation. Phase 2 involves, over a period of six to eight months, a resumption of limited patrolling in the northern part of the areas of separation and limitation. In line with the plan, the mechanized infantry company commenced, on 8 February 2018, limited protected patrolling from Camp Faouar to Jaba, Khan Arnabah, Mount Hermon and Ya'fur. The limited patrolling was suspended on 10 February owing to the security situation and resumed on 14 February. A comprehensive, considered and cautious approach to UNDOF limited patrolling has been adopted. UNDOF implemented a range of force protection measures to mitigate risks to personnel conducting the limited patrolling.

25. Phase 2 of the UNDOF plan also includes the refurbishment of facilities and security infrastructure of select observation posts in the area of separation, with a view to reoccupying observation posts 56, 71 and 72 in phase 3 of the incremental return to the Bravo side operations, conditions permitting. The UNDOF Joint Operations Centre will also commence its relocation to Camp Faouar during phase 2. The return of the UNDOF temporary headquarters from Ya'fur, Damascus, and of the Force Reserve Company from Camp Ziouani to Camp Faouar is also planned to take place during phase 3. Observer Group Golan will not be deployed at observation posts on a permanent basis until such time as the security conditions permit and adequate accommodation and appropriate force protection measures are in place.

26. In accordance with the provisions of resolution 2394 (2017), and the UNDOF operational concept, UNDOF continued its efforts to deploy appropriate technology to ensure the safety and security of UNDOF personnel and equipment. A surveillance trailer was deployed on the Alpha side to Camp Ziouani and position 22, while another was deployed to Camp Faouar. Additional surveillance trailers are expected to be deployed in other United Nations posts. In addition, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations continued to engage with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Government of Israel regarding "the sense and warn" system, the technical specifications of which were shared with the parties in July 2017. The responses of

the parties remain pending. The Security Council will continue to be updated as necessary on progress made and challenges encountered in this respect.

27. UNDOF continued to resupply its positions on Mount Hermon and Camp Faouar from Damascus. UNDOF convoys between Damascus and the United Nations positions were conducted almost daily, using main supply route 7 and the Salam highway, with a UNDOF security escort, accompanied by a liaison officer from the office of the senior Syrian Arab delegate. UNDOF continuously monitors the situation and takes the necessary precautionary measures in planning and conducting its convoys along main supply route 7 and the Salam highway. UNDOF continued to conduct and update its contingency planning for the reinforcement and evacuation of United Nations positions and observation posts on both the Alpha and Bravo sides, as well as in Damascus. UNDOF, through its Force Reserve Company, conducted regular rehearsals, exercises and training for identified contingencies. The implementation of risk mitigation measures, including force protection measures recommended in the military capability study of UNDOF, continued to be developed at the observation posts, positions and operational bases at Camp Ziouani and Camp Faouar.

28. UNDOF continued to follow closely the developments related to the de-escalation zone in the south-west part of the Syrian Arab Republic, which was established in accordance with an agreement reached on 9 July 2017 between Jordan, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. Given the partial overlap between the de-escalation zone and the UNDOF area of operation. UNDOF maintained contact with relevant interlocutors to seek clarity with regard to arrangements envisaged under the agreement and their potential implications for UNDOF. The continuation of these contacts is particularly important in facilitating the implementation of the UNDOF mandate and in ensuring the freedom of movement of the Force, as well as the safety and security of United Nations personnel.

29. As at 26 February 2018, UNDOF comprised 982 troops, including 42 women. Troops are currently deployed from Bhutan (3), Czechia (3), Ghana (2), Fiji (299), Finland (2), India 199), Ireland (135), Nepal (337) and the Netherlands (2). In addition, 70 military observers from UNTSO/ Observer Group Golan, including 8 women, assisted UNDOF in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council resolution 338 (1973)

30. In its resolution 2394 (2017), the Security Council called upon the parties concerned to immediately implement its resolution 338 (1973), decided to renew the mandate of UNDOF for a further period of six months until 30 June 2018 and requested the Secretary-General to report every 90 days on developments in the situation and the measures taken to implement resolution 338 (1973). The search for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East, in particular the efforts made at various levels to implement resolution 338 (1973), is addressed in my report on the situation in the Middle East (A/72/333), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 71/24 on the Syrian Golan and 71/25 on Jerusalem.

31. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. The Syrian conflict is further reducing the prospects for their resumption and for progress towards peace between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the resumption of efforts towards a comprehensive, just and durable peace settlement, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 338 (1973) and other relevant resolutions.

IV. Observations

32. I am gravely concerned about the escalation of tension between the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, as shown by the events of 10 February. I also note with concern the continued military activities in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side and incidents involving the firing of rockets and missiles from the Alpha side and rockets from the Bravo side across the ceasefire line. These developments jeopardize the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. I urge the parties to exercise maximum restraint. I encourage members of the Security Council to support efforts to sensitize both parties and regional stakeholders to the risks of escalation and the need to preserve the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic.

33. It remains critical that the parties maintain their liaison with UNDOF, in the first instance, to prevent any escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line. The United Nations will maintain its efforts to ensure that the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic continues to hold.

34. I remain gravely concerned about the prevailing security situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, its impact on the Syrian population and its implications for the stability of the region. On the Bravo side, the continued presence of and fighting between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups, including listed terrorist groups, such as Jabhat Fath al-Sham, and ISIL affiliates, such as Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, in the UNDOF area of operation jeopardize the long-term ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic and continue to significantly affect UNDOF mandate implementation and the UNDOF area of operation.

35. There should be no military forces in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. I urge all parties to the Syrian conflict to cease military actions throughout the country, including in the UNDOF area of operation, and to remove all military equipment and armed personnel from the area of separation.

36. Interaction and perceived interaction between the Israel Defense Forces and unidentified individuals from the Bravo side have the potential to lead to clashes between armed elements and the Syrian armed forces. I reiterate my call to both parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement regarding the requirement to maintain stability in the area. All military activities in the area of separation conducted by any actor pose a risk to the ceasefire and to the local civilian population, in addition to United Nations personnel on the ground. I call upon all parties to take all measures necessary to protect civilians.

37. The Israel Defense Forces should refrain from firing across the ceasefire line. The firing by the Israel Defense Forces across the ceasefire line has the potential to escalate tensions between the two sides. The continued presence of unauthorized weapons and equipment in the area of limitation on the Alpha side is also of concern.

38. As UNDOF continues to consolidate its presence at Camp Faouar and maintain its efforts to intensify its operations in the area of separation, it remains critical that the safety and security of United Nations personnel be assured. The circumstances under which the troops and military observers are operating remain complex and challenging, and require continued vigilance and risk mitigation measures. I renew my call on the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to fulfil its primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the Bravo side. I also renew my call upon countries with influence to strongly and urgently convey to the armed groups in the UNDOF area of operation the imperative to cease any action in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, including actions

that jeopardize the safety and security of United Nations personnel, and to enable UNDOF to carry out its mandate safely and securely.

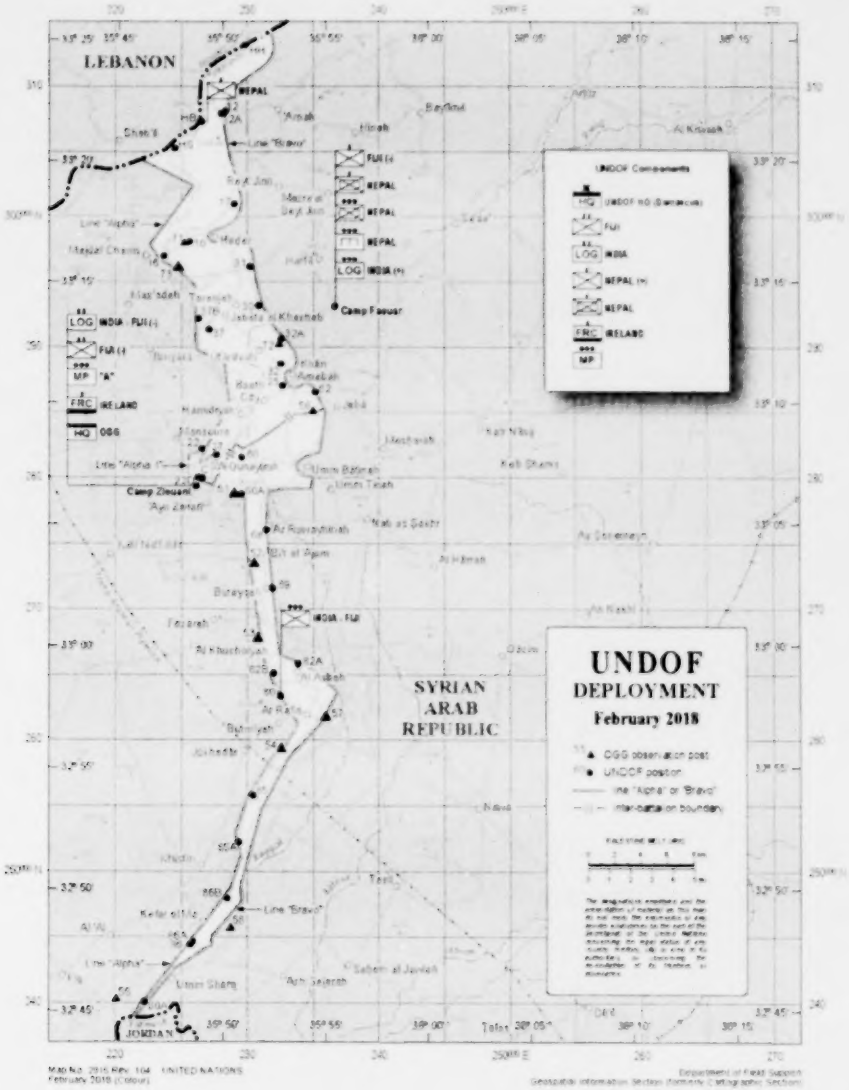
39. Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the presence of UNDOF in calling for a return to vacated positions in the area of separation. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority for the mission, conditions permitting. The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, visited UNDOF, and also met with Israeli and Syrian officials at the end of February 2018, including on mandate implementation and the ongoing gradual return of the mission to the Bravo side.

40. I count on the continued cooperation of both parties to assist the mission in advancing its plans for the incremental return to operations and positions in the area of separation and to ensure that it can implement its mandate. As a matter of priority, the deployment of technology and equipment necessary to enhance UNDOF observation of the area of separation and the ceasefire line, while also augmenting UNDOF force protection, remains critical. In this regard, the support and cooperation of both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic is essential.

41. It is equally important that the Security Council continue to bring to bear its influence on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate in a safe and secure manner and is allowed to operate freely in accordance with the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. As long as the area of separation remains militarized and the presence of armed groups and/or Syrian armed forces continues, UNDOF will only fulfil its mandate in a limited manner. It is essential that this issue be addressed by the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and in the wider framework of the Syrian political process. Furthermore, the reopening of the regular Qunaytirah crossing point would benefit the ability of UNDOF to implement its mandate. It is also necessary for UNDOF to continue to have at its disposal all means and resources necessary for it to return fully to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

42. The confidence and commitment of troop-contributing-countries with respect to UNDOF remains a key factor in the mission's ability to carry out its mandate. I continue to count on the support of troop-contributing-countries as UNDOF proceeds with its agreed plan for increased operations in the area of separation. I am grateful to the Governments of Bhutan, Czechia, Fiji, Finland, India, Ireland, Ghana, Nepal and the Netherlands for their contributions, their commitment, their resolve and their consummate professionalism. I am also thankful to the Member States contributing military observers to UNTSO.

43. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Francis Vib-Sanziri, and to the military and civilian personnel serving under his leadership in UNDOF and the military observers in Observer Group Golan, who continue to perform the important tasks assigned to them by the Security Council with efficiency and commitment, under extremely challenging circumstances.


LEBANON
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
JORDAN
UNDOF
DEPLOYMENT
February 2018
UNDOF Components
Camp Faouar
Camp Ziouani
Line "Alpha"
Line "Bravo"
Map No. 2918 Rev. 104 UNITED NATIONS
February 2018 (Colour)
Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)